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Special Report: 28 Lawmakers Who Will Shape the New Year

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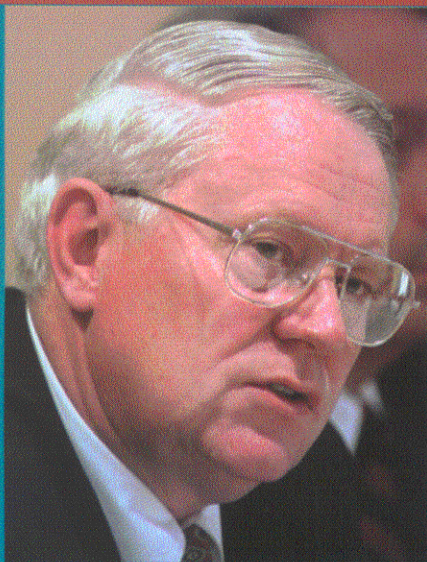
Weekly

Emerging PLAYERS

September 11 Transformed the 107th Congress and Its Mission,
Giving Voice and Influence to a New Cast of Lawmakers

Rep. Joe Pitts

Republican of Pennsylvania



House History: Elected 1996; won third term in 2000 with 67 percent

16th District: Southeast — Lancaster

Hometown: Kennett Square

Born: Oct. 10, 1939, Lexington, Ky.

Religion: Protestant

Family: Wife, Virginia M. "Ginny" Pitts; three children

Education: Asbury College, A.B. 1961; West Chester State College, M.Ed. 1972

Military Service: Air Force, 1963-69

Career: Nursery and landscaping business owner; teacher

Political Highlights: Pennsylvania House, 1973-97

Committees: Energy & Commerce; International Relations

Capitol Office: 225-2411

204 Cannon Building

Washington D.C. 20515-3816

Web: www.house.gov/pitts

INTERNATIONAL

In late September, when Joe Pitts organized a screening of a National Geographic documentary

on Afghanistan's Northern Alliance followed by a discussion with an alliance spokesman, more than 100 people from official Washington showed up. The larger-than-expected crowd was ample evidence that one of Pitts' longtime personal interests had collided with world events.

The nation's newfound attention to the complicated ethnic politics of Central Asia have afforded Pitts a far more receptive ear for one of his main policy aims, greater U.S. involvement in the affairs of that region.

His current knowledge of the area — he grew up in the Philippines, the son of missionaries — is based largely on his trips to India and Pakistan and the ties he has sought to forge between those countries and his rural constituents. During Pitts' most recent visit, in February, he delivered wheelchairs and other medical supplies to hospitals in Pakistan and the disputed Kashmir region. He has set up exchange programs with local governments and universities in China and other nations.

The economic benefits of increased trade are a major component of Pitts' message, but his deep religious convictions also play a role. "I think humanitarian aid is effective, when it's people to people," he said. "It says more about who the American people are and what we stand for than many other things."

At home, Pitts has set up meetings with lawmakers, diplomats and other officials in order to promote a better understanding of regional issues.

Pitts' interest in Central Asia and his belief in the importance of personal diplomacy led him to completely change his committee assignments at the start of the 107th Congress. He swapped his former posts on Armed Services, Budget and Small Business for new ones on Energy and Commerce and International Relations, where he sits on the Middle East and South Asia Subcommittee.

His agenda on Capitol Hill extends well beyond the purview of his committee assignments, reflecting his varied background and his understanding that, as a relatively junior member, the chances of advancing his goals solely through the legislative process are slim.

Pitts follows the same road in Congress that he traveled during 24 years in the Pennsylvania legislature — one with few left turns. He is a strong proponent of cutting taxes and limiting the scope of the federal government, and he is a fervent opponent of abortion. When he ran for re-election last year, one newspaper in his district, the Lancaster New Era, lauded him as "a tax cutter, budget balancer and moral crusader."

To further his agenda, Pitts works with various coalitions in Congress that advocate a larger role in civic life for families, businesses and religious and nonprofit groups. These organizations include the Republican Study Committee (formerly the Conservative Action Team, or CATs), the Renewal Alliance, the Fatherhood Promotion Task Force, the Pro-Life Caucus, the Religious Prisoners Congressional Task Force and the Values Action Team, which he leads. He even serves as a liaison between two of the groups, delivering weekly reports to the CATs on what the Values Action Team is doing.

Under fire in 1998 for not aggressively pursuing a conservative agenda on social issues, GOP leaders created the Values Action Team, an ad hoc task force, and named Pitts its head. The group's legislative priorities have included restricting abortions, abolishing federal arts funding and eliminating the "marriage penalty," a quirk in the tax code that results in some two-earner married couples paying higher taxes than they would if each partner were single. During his first term, he and about 20 GOP freshmen proposed a tax cut package that included reductions in the so-called marriage penalty, exclusion from taxation of some interest and dividend income, and deductibility of all health insurance premiums paid by self-employed workers.

Pitts, in an essay titled "Defense for Peace," dated Dec. 19, 2000:

Not since the 1930s has military spending been so low as a percentage of gross national product. At the same time, our forces have been committed more frequently than ever before — as high as one deployment every nine weeks.

President-elect George W. Bush is determined to change things, and Congress is behind him. The first purpose of our military is to prevent war. Its second purpose is to fight wars when prevention fails. When we go to war it should be for clearly defined, achievable goals based exclusively in defending the national interest. . . .

Even in its presently weakened state, our military is the strongest military in the world. . . .

With terrorism crossing oceans to American shores, and nations like Iran, Iraq, and North Korea working to build their own nuclear arsenals, our national security is no less threatened than it was during the Cold War. These threats, though, are hard to pin down, hard to see, and hard to deter. We should be focusing our energies on developing a national missile defense, on anti-terrorism, and on intelligence. We should not be using our military to do the work diplomats and politicians should be doing.

We have many friends and allies around the world, and, yes, we should be prepared to defend them as they would defend us. We should not retreat into ourselves and return to isolation.

But our military, while it needs to be strengthened, should be used sparingly. Our sons and daughters are willing to put their lives on the line to defend their home. They should not be asked to risk their lives for every lost cause in each of the forlorn nations of the world.

Pitts spent most of his youth in the back country of the Philippines, where his parents were engaged in Christian missionary work. He says he witnessed not only poverty and devastation close up, but also the personal satisfaction that a life in public service can bring.

After returning to his native Kentucky, marrying and earning a college degree in philosophy and religion, Pitts embarked on a teaching career along with his wife, Virginia. When she became pregnant, he discovered that the family could not live on his lone teaching salary. He spent the next five and a half years in the Air Force, where during three tours of duty in Southeast Asia he flew 116 combat missions as the navigator and electronic warfare officer of a B-52. He considered an Air Force career but discarded the idea when, returning home after an active duty tour, his 3-year-old son did not recognize him.

Pitts drew on his military experience in his work during the 106th Congress on the Armed Services panel, where he carved out a niche as an advocate for increasing the United States' electronic warfare capabilities, which in his view were stretched too thin during the 1999 bombing campaign in Kosovo.

After leaving the military, Pitts moved the family to Pennsylvania, where he earned a master's degree and went back to teaching — high school mathematics and science. (He has sponsored legislation to require that 95 percent of federal education dollars reach the classroom and are not lost in the bureaucracy.) Pitts eventually joined his wife's family's landscape and nursery business and then started his own landscaping firm.

He is active in a number of human rights organizations, including the Helsinki Commission, which provides U.S. oversight of democratization and human rights enhancement efforts in Central and eastern Europe. But unlike many lawmakers with strong human rights agendas, Pitts favored permanent normalization of the U.S.-China trade relationship, arguing that increased involvement in international affairs would spur China to improve its human rights record. In 2000, as the issue came to a head, Pitts hosted briefings for lawmakers where academics and religious leaders made the case for trade with China.

Social policy conservatives have a vocal ally in Pitts. He gives no quarter on the abortion issue; in fact, his anti-abortion ardor earned him serious opposition from pro-abortion rights Republicans in his 1992 and 1994 state House primaries and in his 1996 congressional bid. He also wants to boost prosecutions for violations of obscenity and child exploitation laws.

In the 105th, he helped found the Fatherhood Promotion Task Force, a group seeking to promote parental responsibility that was formed in the wake of a study indicating almost a quarter of U.S. children live without fathers at home. He made news in 1999 when he blamed Homer Simpson, Hank Hill and other bumbling TV cartoon dads for contributing to the decline of fatherhood.

Pitts' affiliation with a number of non-legislative organizations on the Hill once also included his membership in a singing group called the Capitol Four, but it disbanded after the 105th Congress when one of the quartet, Republican Michael Pappas of New Jersey, was defeated.

Pitts got into politics soon after he moved to Pennsylvania, working on local political campaigns, but did not think of running for office himself until colleagues convinced him to run for an open state House seat in 1972. He upset the party-endorsed candidate and served in the House for 24 years, including eight years as chairman of the Appropriations Committee. In Harrisburg, he developed a reputation for encasing his conservative outspokenness in an unassuming temperament.

Five years ago, when Republican Rep. Robert S. Walker (1977-97) decided to retire, Pitts soon entered the fray. He took 45 percent of the vote in a hard-fought primary against four other Republicans. Then, given the GOP's more than 2-to-1 dominance of registered voters, won the general election by 22 percentage points. He has not been challenged seriously in either of his re-election bids.

— Derek Willis